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ABSTRACT

The often conflicting roles of the foreign language teacher and the guidance counselor are explored in this paper. Teachers are advised to foster improved communication in the classroom and thereby help students improve communication skills. A list of commonly held attitudes of language teachers and guidance personnel toward each other are presented. (RL)

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The Foreign Language Teacher or the Guidance Counselor· Who's Passing the Buck?

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Most of you here today have probably noticed a peculiar situation that has developed in the past few years at many foreign-language conferences. Someone mentions the guidance counselor and how he or she does or does not do what the foreign-language teacher expects in terms of aiding, advising, directing pupils when it comes to foreign-language study--hands wave, foreign-language teachers start to squirm and jump up and down, in a large meeting room lines form at the microphones. Everybody, it seems, has a strong opinion, often expressed with anger, certainly with frustration The "Good News" stories are in the minority.

For me, the type of experience which I have just described has been frustrating--often so frustrating that I am not sure that I really have tried to pay careful attention to what the other people were trying to say. In some respects I must be spoiled, because I can feel myself get angry very fast when I hear about someone who acts as if the study of a foreign language really is not all that important. After all, what is the use of even trying to communicate with someone who has such an irrational attitude?

I don't intend to rehash the recent history of factors affecting foreign-language study, interest, and enrollments--mostly I would just like to say that if you are associated with the field, you know that there are problems and you already should know what some of those problems are.

Foreign-language teachers are a frustrated lot. They should be. With all that federal money that poured in for equipment, training, research, support for post graduate study, of course we got the idea that we were important and what we were doing was intrinsically worthwhile. How dare anyone question affluence?! Maybe the guidance counselor has experienced a similar kind of professional ego inflation. Keep in mind that while society has been changing, it has been charging the counselor with new sets of immediate tasks.

The public communicates to the schools that not specifically preparing kids for jobs is becoming a luxury we cannot afford. The message we get in foreign languages is loud and clear: "If it won't help my kid get a job--forget it, it costs too much."

What would you say to prospective school board members who suggest saving money by cutting out the "non-academics" such as music and art? How can you justify teaching in school about another culture when it looks like we won't be able to continue to teach much about our own?

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At this point, some of you may think that it would be appropriate for me to to list in detail all the attacks against foreign-language study, arguments to use to counter the attacks, and a general exhortation to do something. I am assuming that what we do NOT need here is another list of the attacks against and arguments for the study of foreign languages. If you care about that, you already are aware of most of those. Specifically, I would like to point out in one way or another what I perceive to be some of the problems that exist in communication between the foreign-language teacher and the guidance counselor and to suggest some things that you and I as individuals must seriously consider doing--that is, if we as individuals can overcome our sense of indignant frustration long enough to make two-way communication between the foreign-language teacher and the guidance counselor work.. Notice that I did not say "give it a chance," or "make it possible," I said make it "work".

No single speech (or sermon), no single article or book containing "The Answer" or loaded with "helpful hints" can solve any problem (except perhaps a one-sided need to communicate). No head-nodding (in agreement or in sleep) while listening or reading is going to solve the problems of communication between the foreign-language teacher and the guidance counselor, or between the foreign-language teacher and any identifiable group or individual.

Problems in communication, even resentment, exist between many foreign-language teachers and guidance counselors. This in itself seems to compound many other problems which prevent us from being more effective as teachers. Perhaps I do have some ideas why the communication problems exist. You might agree with some of my ideas, say "yes, that's right," you might even feel better knowing that somebody out there feels the same way you do. There is only one thing that you can do that can help solve the problems of communication, and that is to improve communication YOURSELF!

One of you, an individual, must go to the guidance counselor and say that you know you are not communicating effectively with him. (How do you know you are not communicating well? Your foreign-language classes would be full if you were communicating well Right?) Tell him you do not understand some of the things he is trying to do and you think he doesn't understand some of the things you are trying to do. Start talking about things that are really important and find out where you agree with one another.

But we really must learn to listen, not only to what others say to us, but to what we say to others. As human beings one big problem that we face is that we tend to take ourselves too seriously. I believe that a distinction can be made between (1) taking yourselves too seriously, and (2) seriously believing in ourselves and what we feel is important.

If we are not to take ourselves too seriously and if we are to act on the basis of our serious beliefs, we must be aware that we have many inconsistencies and we must be able to identify our weaknesses without fearing them. Why must we be aware of our inconsistencies and weaknesses in our actions and our arguments? One reason, I think, is so that we can conserve our energy which often can be used up in attacking the same kind of weaknesses and inconsistencies in others that we do not like in ourselves either.

We must listen both to what we say and what we mean, and in trying to listen to others, we must do the same thing. We have the capacity and quite possibly the right to be just as irrational as the next person--though we would like to think at times that the other person exercises his right more than we do.

We do not necessarily communicate better by attacking the other person's weaknesses. In fact, this seems to be a pretty effective technique for destroying communication. Attacking another person's weaknesses does, though, seem to be a pretty good way of communicating something about ourselves that we usually do not intend to communicate.

We must learn to listen to ourselves and to listen to others not in order to attack others or to manipulate them, but to help them and us to become aware in a non-defensive manner of what it is that we are serious about and hope that others are serious about the same things.

What do you think the foreign-language teacher and the guidance counselor would say to one another if they really were trying to communicate? And what do they really say? What follows is merely an attempt to suggest a few of the things that you might possibly hear or say. This exchange is fictitious, but plausible, I think. But please try to listen carefully to what it is that each language teacher and each counselor is saying, what you think he means, and what you think he tells about himself.

Some of you may find a few of the so-called "quotations" a little humorous, at least out of context. Others of you might accuse me of having followed you around with notepad in hand. But I remember making some similar comments myself, so if something sounds uncomfortably like you--just keep in mind that I probably said it first.

The Foreign Language Teacher: "Why do I always have to defent the worth of my subject? It just isn't fair. People don't attack math or science or history that way."

The FL Teacher: "You don't do any work anyway. I always see you wandering around the halls or talking with some student. If they cut out part of the program, it should be guidance, not foreign languages."

The FL Teacher: "Why don't you have special occupational information to give to the students so more of them would sign up for a foreign language and more of them would study it longer?"

The FL Teacher: "Anyway, you're an administrator, so how can I trust you?"

The FL Teacher: "You're always giving those tests that say who should study a foreign language and who shouldn't, but you never tell me how they're supposed to work. What if they don't work?"

The FL Teacher: "Why don't you ever come around and ask how you could help me? I've got preparations for four different language levels plus two in English and I'm supposed to save the world for foreign languages all alone!"

The FL Teacher: "Why do I have to plan sixteen different activities for each class period--besides making them all fun so they'll sign up for the second year? Most other teachers don't seem to work that hard and their subjects aren't in danger of being dropped!"

The FL Teacher: "Most of the reasons kids have for signing up for foreign languages are unrealistic. Why don't you do something about that?"

The FL Teacher: "You couldn't get past the foreign language requirements in liberal arts and had to transfer to education. Why do you think every kid is going to have as bad an experience as you did?"

The FL Teacher: "How come you always want to talk about the job opportunities? Can't you ever defend anything on the basis of its value in a good education?"

The FL Teacher: "How come you're always giving tests and things like that instead of spending time with the teachers and kids who need a little help once in a while?"

The FL Teacher: "I thought the kids were supposed to have the opportunity to take different courses including foreign language, not just have the opportunity to be told what some test results say they shouldn't take."

The FL Teacher: "How come you're always sending kids to me when they don't have any talent for foreign languages?"

The FL Teacher: "How come you don't send more kids to my courses?"

The FL Teacher: "No, no. You don't understand. I didn't mean just more students, I meant more good students."

The FL Teacher: "Well, if you don't have the time to give this extra information to the kids, who does?"

The FL Teacher: "How come you get a higher salary than I do?"

And now . . .

The Guidance Counselor: "Why do you expect me to do more for you than I do for the other teachers?"

The Counselor: "Why don't you tell me exactly what it is that you want me to do for you?"

The Counselor: "But I thought those foreign-language prognosis tests were helping your program! Why didn't you tell me you had doubts about them?"

The Counselor: "Why don't you tell me these things before the kids have their schedules all made out for next year?"

The Counselor: "If you want me to provide good information on reasons for studying foreign languages and job opportunities in the field--tell me where I can get it."

The Counselor: "If I gave the kids all those reasons for styding a foreign language that you just gave me, number one, they wouldn't believe me, number two, I wouldn't have time to give any information about any other subjects."

The Counselor: "Yeh..., but if I told them that, nobody would sign up for Latin."

The Counselor: "Why don't you ask the kids what they think the problem is?"

The Counselor: "Yes, I'd like to provide all that extra information so that the kids and their parents could make their choices on a more informed basis, but the principal would think that's unfair to the other subject areas."

The Counselor: "Well, if it were so good for them, everybody would sign up for it, wouldn't they?"

The Counselor: "You tell me and the kids that studying a foreign language is easy, and then the first thing you know they're all in to see me trying to get out of it because it's too much work."

The Couselor: "You want me to defend foreign languages for you, and you don't know how to do it yourself? That's wilde"

The Counselor: "Why do you expect me to be more up-to-date in your field than in the other subjects?"

The Counselor: "You want more students, I send you more students--and now you're complaining because some of them aren't doing so well."

The Counselor: "Sure that's fine for foreign languages in general, but how am I supposed to say that applies completely to the one you teach?"

The Counselor: "You foreign-language teachers wanted us to be more selective and now we're more selective. What do you want now?"

The Counselor: "What do you mean I sound like an administrator? All I said was four different levels of French is still one subject, isn't it?"

The Counselor: "How can you ask me to make all those promises when you know darn well most of them won't learn enough to do anything with it?"

The Counselor: "Yes, I know it's got a lot of useful information, but who's going to pay for 2,000 copies of a 75-page booklet?"

Those of you foreign language teachers who teach in the junior and senior high schools--do you have clear convictions about the role of the school? Do you accept the practice where counselors and teachers spend their time in

selecting, that is excluding, certain pupils for studying foreign languages? Or do you insist, with conviction about the role of the school, that the counselor and other school personnel expend their efforts in informing the pupils so that they may make more intelligent choices within the program, and then expend even more effort working with the pupils and teachers in helping the pupils to succeed? So what if a certain pupil hasn't done too well in the past in some other subjects? Foreign language study is one of the few subjects where almost everyone can get a "fresh start". Kids can change. People can change. If you do not really believe that people can change, then there really is very little reason to believe that anything you try to do is going to make any difference in what the counselor does with respect to the foreign language program. If you do believe that people can change as the result of certain positive influences, then that conviction should be reflected in your concept of the role you have to play in the school, as well as being reflected in your behavior in attempting to influence changes in the attitudes affecting the work of other school personnel in their work with pupils.

You as a foreign language teacher have to be willing to make the extra special effort of showing how your program in a very special way can show kids that they really do have a chance to change, that they don't have to conform to an old pattern of non-success. You as a foreign language teacher have to go to the principal, to the guidance counselor,to other teachers, to parents, and to the kids to let them know that there still is a place in your classes for kids who might simply want to be there, kids who for some strange reason at the advanced age of 13 or 14 (or, Heaven forbid, even older) do not know for sure what they want to do in life, who have not been particularly motivated in the past, who have not been outstanding students, who need convincing that it is all right to begin to develop new interests, new attitudes, that there is such a thing as a fresh start, that there are teachers who want them in their classes because they believe that is "what it's all about "

If you are that kind of teacher, then you have practically no other choice that to insist that the guidance counselor devote his efforts to helping kids achieve, to learn, to learn how to learn, to help you as a teacher find good approaches to working with these pupils; it is also true then that you have practically no other choice than to insist, in whatever way you can best communicate it, that guidance counselors and any other school personnel not be permitted to come between you and the pupils, not be permitted to act in ways that are not consistent with what you know to be the proper role of you as a teacher.

If you are not convinced that you as a foreign-language teacher have a special role as a teacher and that you have special advantages and opportunities for working with kids that lots of other teachers do not have, then, to be quite honest with you, I don't think that you have much chance to influence what the guidance counselor does in your school. But I still believe that you can change, I still believe that you can sort out the things that are really important to you and to your role as a teacher when you begin to see what needs to be done.

As a foreign-language teacher, you cannot expect the guidance counselor to seek you out constantly to ask what he can do to help you in your program. Perhaps you should expect this, perhaps counselors could be more effective if

they did most of their work through the classroom teacher, thereby multiplying their influence. If you believe that, then it could very well be consistent with your role in teaching to try to bring that about, but it will not happen without your efforts. You can complain all you want about never being able to influence changes in our society, but if you never try to influence changes in things that should be the closest to you in your professional life, then that is all you will ever do--complain.

There are demands in on the time and energy of the counselor. Do not expect the counselor spontaneously to volunteer more time and energy to be placed at your disposal. You show him how those finite amounts of time and energy can be better redirected. If necessary, remind him of the role of the school. Keep in mind that the counselor is just as subject as you are to falling into a "pattern", a pattern of behavior in which one somehow does not take the time to question whether it is the most appropriate way, with admittedly limited resources, to accomplish what one deep down inside knows are the most important things for us to be doing.

Things are changing so very rapidly. Do not just let all these changes take place. Many changes are inevitable--but you can still try to guide, to influence some of the changes. (Is the guidance counselor the only person in the school who should be "guiding"?) This effort does not take less energy, it takes more. But do not let someone else tell you what is important to concentrate on--you decide what is important.

You can go to all the professional meetings you want, you can make all the resolutions you want, you can make all the speeches you want, you can listen all you want (and maybe feel a little better, because sometimes someone says something from time to time that you agree with, or what is better, says something you do not agree with so that you somehow get involved in doing your own thinking)--but it is not a single one of these "impersonal" activities that will bring about change in your school. If you want changes made--you set about making these changes.

Do not ask where you will find the time, because you will not--you have to take the time. Do not ask where you will find the energy, either--you are already tired from expending energy. I suggest you decide whether your energy is going into the things you think are most important in your work with young people. If it is--fine! If your professional energy is being wasted on things that are not central to your concerns as a teacher, change things in the best, most humane way you can work out. Along the way, do not fight the counselor, convince him to rejoin your side.